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SUBJECT: PRESS TV: IRAN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ENTERS GLOBAL STAGE

REF: OSC, OCT 29, FEA20071029384146

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Iran's 24-hour satellite English language news station, Press TV, began operations in July 2007. It has moved quickly to establish itself through widely dispersed correspondents, a large staff in Tehran and London, aggressive recruitment of guests, and generally high quality content from at least a technical perspective. Press TV appears to receive strong financial backing from the Iranian government. To date, programming dealing with the US has been consistently one-sided in its criticism of US foreign policy. In addition, a central focus of Press TV's programming has been presenting a friendlier, more moderate portrayal of Islam, starkly contrasting with the fundamentalism of "jihadis." Despite its claim to offer an accurate picture of Iran to Western audiences, Press TV - like al Jazeera and virtually all regional media outlets in their coverage of host governments - have steered clear of directly criticizing Iranian government policies or leaders. While Press TV continues to face many hurdles in gaining audience share in an increasingly crowded market (and presumably it is not included in any US cable packages), it represents a significant Iranian investment in "soft power" and expansion of its public diplomacy message. Press TV, incidentally, is not shown inside Iran. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) According to press reports, Press TV established its website January 2007, and went on the air as a 24-hour English-language satellite news network on July 2, 2007. At a recent media conference in Dubai, a recent Iranian graduate of the American University of Sharjah's Communications faculty presented her observations on Press TV operations to date. According to this researcher, Press TV's staff is reportedly selected through a rigorous screening process. Employees now number 400-plus, with more than 55 reporters based in 35 locations. Reporters are largely citizens of the countries from which they report. Among Press TV's current locations are Jerusalem, Gaza City, Ramallah, Beirut, Damascus, Istanbul, London, New York, and Washington. According to its website, Press TV is carried on ten satellite systems.

¶3. (SBU) The CEO of Press TV is Mohammad Sarafriz, the Vice President of IRIB. Press TV claims to offer deeper and more balanced analyses of the news than Western media outlets. According to the Iranian media researcher, Iranian officials describe Press TV as "state-owned but not state-controlled" Iranian officials occasionally appear on Press TV (mostly with English translations). Iranian political and cultural figures have discussed Israel-Palestinian issues, US policy in the

Middle East, and cultural and religious issues. Iranian commentators appear to avoid criticism of Iranian domestic or foreign policy, although some non-Iranian panelists on various programs have challenged Iranian policy positions.

¶4. (SBU) An excellent assessment of Press TV programming is available through BBC Monitoring (reftel). The key findings of this October 29 2007 report were: "The channel is a mixture of professionally-produced journalism and serious discussion, on the one hand, and sometimes amateurish, blatantly propagandistic output, on the other. Since its launch on July 2, Press TV has been constantly critical of the US administration, particularly with regard to policies towards Iran and the Middle East in general. It also seeks to promote an understanding of Islam as a peaceful, tolerant religion and is critical, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, of militant, jihadi Islamism of the type associated with Osama bin Laden."

¶5. (SBU) Guests have included prominent figures from the fields of journalism, academia, and occasionally, government officials. In the US, political arena representatives have been limited to former Congressional staffers and campaign organizers. Former Department of Homeland Security director nominee Bernard Kerick appeared on the 4 Corners program as part of a panel discussion, taking a position strongly in favor of US administration on terrorism issues.

¶6. (SBU) Press TV is actively recruiting guests among these various institutions and organizations, including an academic Iran-focused chat group that includes most prominent Middle East and Iran experts in academia and beyond. One interviewee (privileged info) complained that Press TV was unprofessional in their selective use of his quotes and insistence of pressing the Iranian position - in this case on the Ahmadinejad visit to New York in late September 2007 - and announced that he would not talk to them again. Other academics have also challenged Press TV's journalistic integrity, while others counter that Press TV could have positive impacts on democratization and modernization in the region similar to Al Jazeera, and that "boycotting" Press

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TV is counterproductive. Finally, some scholars and former policy-makers have suggested that other mass media outlets have their own political agendas, including VOA, and that Press TV is no different. In discussions with local media and communications scholars, officials and students at the media conference in Dubai referred to above, several indicated they view Press TV as another news outlet like Al Jazeera, MBC, and others which are collectively challenging a perceived media imbalance skewed towards long-established (and purportedly biased) Western mainstream outlets.

¶7. (SBU) According to the media researcher, Press TV reportedly faced early challenges gaining access to satellites for broadcast and securing press credentials for its reporters - hurdles which it has in most cases overcome at this point. The Iranian government has invested heavily in building Press TV largely from scratch. Whatever the amounts the IRIG has invested on Press TV, the scope, staffing, technical sophistication and general quality of Press TV operations indicate the Iranian government is committed to a serious effort to use Press TV to boost its public diplomacy outreach with the English-speaking world. The Iranian government already funds foreign language satellite broadcasting in Arabic (two 24 hour networks, Al Alam and Al Kowthar), as well as the multi-language (primarily Azeri Turkish, Kurdish, and Urdu) network, Sahar. With these networks now in place, and the Iranian government flush with oil revenue to sustain their quality and content, Iran appears poised to reach a broad audience with an increasingly sophisticated public diplomacy message.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Despite its modern look and apparent willingness to explore controversial regional issues in a relatively open manner, we can not consider Press TV as an example of increased freedom of expression within Iran. Iran's enhanced commitment to expanding the reach of their views, and

their ample use of American and other foreign guests and locations, does not seem to have reduced Iranian government paranoia about similar transborder programming by other countries. Iran has taken active steps against VOA/Radio Farda broadcasts, including detaining within Iran a Radio Farda broadcaster, and aggressively discouraging Iranians from appearing as guests or otherwise cooperating with these outlets.

Unless and until we see Iran offering reciprocal access to US broadcasters in Iran (USG or otherwise) to that which Press TV enjoys in the US, or Press TV begins turning at least some attention on Iran's pressing issues, Press TV will remain a relatively limited anti-US propaganda tool.

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